

**Statement on the 75th Anniversary of the Desegregation of the United States Armed Forces**

*July 26, 2023*

Seventy-five years ago today, President Truman signed Executive order 9981, ending the unconscionable racial segregation of our Armed Forces and bringing our Nation closer to our founding values. This landmark order, issued more than a decade before the passage of the Civil Rights Act, directed the military to ensure the "equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Armed Services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin." It was a vital step forward for our Nation. It recognized the equal bravery and equal sacrifices of generations of servicemembers of color who deserved to be equally honored. So today, as we commemorate this milestone on our unending journey toward our more perfect Union, we honor the contributions, sacrifice, and resilience of the brave service women and men of every background who stepped up to defend our Nation, in so many cases, even before their rights as equals under the law had yet to be realized.

This contrast is particularly poignant in the stories of Black servicemembers, whose contributions to our Armed Forces date back to the Revolutionary War and the founding of our country. Black regiments joined the cause of the Union in the Civil War, while fighting for their own freedom from enslavement. The Harlem Hellfighters helped turn the tide of World War I, but did so while assigned to the French Army because American commanders did not allow them to fight alongside white units. The proud Tuskegee Airmen flew more than 15,000 sorties in World War II, only to face discrimination and oppression when they returned home. These stories, and countless others, venerate American heroes who never gave up on our country, and in so doing, relentlessly pushed our Nation closer to the ideals of liberty and justice for all.

Likewise, courageous women and men of color, including Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans have always stepped up to serve our Nation dating back to our Revolution. From the Native American Code Talkers of World War II, whose innovative use of their native languages formed an unbreakable code that helped secure victory in the Pacific while back home the Tribal Nations were dispossessed of their land; to the famous 442nd Central Postal Directory Team of Japanese Americans who fought to liberate Europe even as their own families were wrongly imprisoned in Japanese internment camps at home; to the Army's 6888 Central Postal Directory Regiment of Puerto Rican servicemembers known as the Borinqueneers, who fought bravely in the Korean war only to be court-martialed and jailed, these troops have led the fight for freedom and equality at home and abroad.

And today, as we celebrate this proud legacy of service, we also honor those who currently serve in uniform and recommit ourselves to the work we must do—as a military, and as a society—to ensure they can do so with dignity and respect, secure in the knowledge that their talents will be valued, their sacrifices will be honored, and their families supported.

I have long said that our one truly sacred obligation as a nation is to prepare and equip those we send into harm's way and to care for them and their families both while they are deployed and when they return home. Our military thrives and succeeds when our people succeed. Today, more than 40 percent of Active Duty servicemembers are people of color. Yet, despite this growing diversity, servicemembers of color still face unacceptable barriers. They are underrepresented in positions of senior leadership, face bias in the military justice system, and are still more likely to be dishonorably discharged. We owe it to them and the entire force to continue working to build a military where equal dignity and equal respect are fully realized.

As Commander in Chief, this is a priority for me personally, and for my entire administration. It is critical that the full diversity and strength of our force is reflected at every level of the Department of Defense, including at the highest levels of leadership. Our servicemembers deserve nothing less than a fair and equitable work place, from the Secretary of Defense down to the newest recruit. That's why the Department of Defense has taken steps to better address racial bias in the ranks and to strengthen equal opportunity, including by increasing the transparency of promotion selections and updating hair and dress standards. It's also why I have committed to strengthening the military justice system, advancing reforms to enhance fairness in the prosecution and defense of serious crimes, including changes to ensure random selection of panel members for courts-martial.

America's greatest strength has always been our diversity, and there is no greater testament to this than the success of our military. Let us continue to break down barriers so that all qualified servicemembers, no matter their race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or religious background, are treated with dignity and respect, can reach their full potential and have their contributions valued. On this day, the 75th anniversary of the Executive order that forever strengthened our military, we must remain unflagging in our effort to complete the work that lies ahead. That is how we will ensure the United States Armed Forces remains the greatest fighting force in the history of the world.

*Categories:* Statements by the President : Armed Forces, U.S., 75th anniversary of desegregation.

*Subjects:* Armed Forces, U.S., 75th anniversary of desegregation; Minority servicemembers, equity improvement efforts; Racial equality, improvement efforts; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD202300658.